
Amrita Nandy. *Motherhood and Choice: Uncommon Mothers, Childfree Women*

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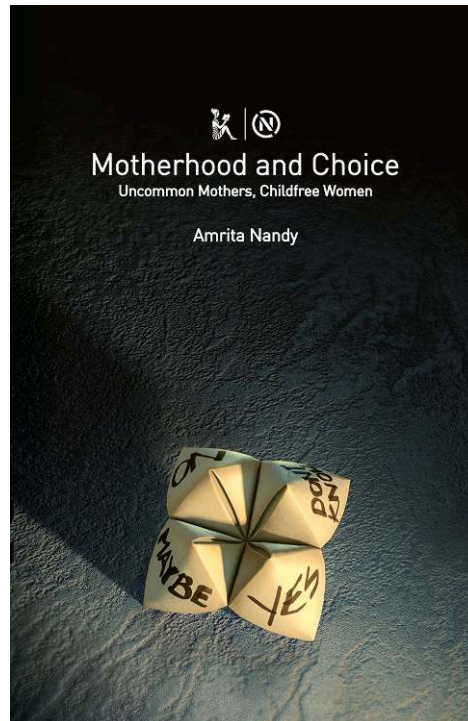
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1 In *Motherhood and Choice: Uncommon Mothers, Childless Women* the author wishes to shed light on gender roles and gendered structures in ideas and practices of motherhood and (non-) mothering in (North) India across “institutions, experience and agency” through a feminist post-structuralist perspective. Struck by her own uncertainty about motherhood despite the apparent ubiquity and compulsions of pro-natalism and the naturalization of women as mothers, Amrita Nandy selected the theme for her doctoral research. It was a complex uncertainty that was not hers alone—the desire to have a child and to be a mother, having cherished the mothering she received, but also a questioning of those desires—not just of biological motherhood, but of mothering itself and the labor it entails.



- 2 Emphasizing that motherhood is not singular, despite what she calls “mater-normativity,” Amrita Nandy (2017) draws on literature and methods from a range of social sciences that gender and feminist studies have sought to knit together: textual analysis, history, sociology, psychology. She begins by examining the “discursive constitution of the hegemonic maternal subject” (p. 10), in which motherhood is romanticized across literatures and layers of society and culture and tied to notions of nation and morality. The intention of the book and the research is to go further; it is to examine how the hegemonic maternal subject cannot quite hold. Her interlocutors, hence, are “a heterogeneous group of unconventional mothers and voluntary non-mothers” (p. 9). Through these “maternal outliers,” possibilities of resistance and alternative mothering, she aims to give voice to the women/mothers themselves and draw attention to voluntary non-motherhood—something she finds largely absent in the literature—emphasizing the idea of the childfree rather than the negative of the childless (despite the latter being in the title of the book).
- 3 The book covers a number of contexts and concerns around motherhood and gender, explored through websites, blogs, extensive, ethnographic interviews with non-mothers and mothers and conversations with the officials and “experts” they must deal with. Following a chapter in which she outlines her framework, provides a literature review and summarizes her theoretical and methodological questions, in the next she elaborates on the naturalized norms that make up her idea of mater-normativity. To do this, she takes a quick traverse through an archive of selected materials that she assembles to analyze the affirmation of motherhood norms in religious ideas, state and market initiatives, images of the nation, and didactic and other textual representations of tradition and modernity. She presents both the conforming subject and a counter discourse of ideas, narratives and practices. The voices she recounts from “mommy

blogs” are fascinating and bring into relief the fault lines of motherhood that she takes further through her maternal “outliers” in later chapters.

- 4 In the following four chapters we hear the voices of diverse mothers from her fieldwork. Her categories, that may be distinct from each other or overlap, are the childfree and voluntary non-mothers, biological non-mothers (surrogates) and non-biological mothers who have chosen to adopt—(described as mirror images of each other), working mothers, including sex workers, unwed and lesbian mothers. To be or not be a mother, a full-time, but non-conforming mother, or a mother who must be a chaste woman in society’s eyes are among the quandaries that the narratives speak of. Towards the end, Nandy pulls together the varied ways the women she has spoken to are questioning sexual norms and the family, even as “the family” and ideals of motherhood strike back. At this point in particular I wished that the book had an index to facilitate returning to themes and passages in earlier chapters.
- 5 Normativities and discontents of motherhood and the search for alternative mothering have individually and to a greater or lesser extent, been a concern, especially in autobiographies and fiction writing.¹ The significance of Nandy’s research lies in bringing them together. Her running engagement, emergent from her first questions, is with the challenges of resistance and building alternative intimate lives and the theorization of choice, agency and subjectivities with which she ends her book.
- 6 It has taken me an unconscionable time to sit down to read this book, perhaps, because I have moved from looking at mothering per se to exploring the political economy and narratives of marriage and care, albeit largely with a focus on childcare. Some of my own concerns have been the changing constructions and invisibilities in hegemonic ideas of motherhood, the contradictions that come to the fore if we move beyond them and the possibility of an empowered motherhood (Palriwala 2002), the labor of care and the persisting desire for motherhood (Palriwala 2005), within a framework that centers social relations and the idea of relatedness. I found, as Nandy does through her book, that critically exploring motherhood almost automatically denaturalizes gendered normativities. The following comments are evoked by the engaging narratives and discussion in Nandy’s book, filtered through my work (though Nandy has not looked at it). I focus on two issues that I kept wanting more discussion on as I read the book. They stem from embedding motherhoods in the extended terrains of social life and values in which they are constructed and played out and, most importantly, think through the relationality in which human life is embedded.
- 7 A woman in India is expected to be a mother, but not because she is to be a mother in and of itself. This is my first concern—a woman must first be a wife and the right sort of wife, who can produce the right sort of progeny for her husband—a son of course—through the right sort of marriage to ensure that the son is of the right caste, religion, family line; the husband must be recognizable as the father. The naturalization and glorification of motherhood is in this context—inevitable and desirable marriage. It can then accomplish what it must—producing and reproducing the structures and practices of caste, community, class, gender, and the unequal privileges of the social order. Herein lies the rub. Compulsory and proper marriage decries “improper” mothers and mothering, so being without children or without a sexual partner and companion can be resistance; proper marriage may also lead to sex selection of those to be mothered. Motherhood is entailed in the duties of a “proper” wife and becomes, for many, the

chain tying them into a bad marriage, but also the hope of making a marriage good or fulfilling. Or motherhood may enable an escape from a marriage.

- 8 By and large, a woman will not be asked why she is not a mother if she is unmarried, but in fact, as Nandy tells us, why she is not married. She and her parents are warned that she must not delay marriage, which it is assumed she/they desire. It is suggested that not only will a good match become unlikely as time passes, becoming a mother become more difficult, and there are subtle warnings that there can be no sex before marriage: all of which are their concerns, as Nandy too emphasizes. As a mother, caring for spouse, children and house, an intertwined caring but in that order, makes her a good woman, even if for an individual these responsibilities are not necessarily intertwined or in this order. The single mother is incorporated into a community beyond her family only if she appears a chaste woman—through adoption or a recognized male partner—or as a member of a stigmatized community, whether of sex workers or the Bedias. In many of the narratives that Nandy recounts, a woman feels she becomes respectable and liked once a mother and feels herself to be more likeable too—she becomes a social being as I discuss below. Yet, we also see, read and hear that motherhood is not enough on its own, socially or in the woman's eyes—more than this is expected of her in relational terms.
- 9 My second theme is the *essential* relationality of human beings—a position argued in many philosophical and anthropological/sociological discussions. This has been important in the conceptual rethinking of kinship and family, especially through comparative works of scholars such as Marilyn Strathern and Janet Carstens² and the questioning of an assumed universality of ideas of reproductive biology and of its significance in making kinship. What such work has brought out is not only that reproductive biology is not conceptualized in a singular way across cultures; people and subjectivities are made in social relations, which societies, cultures and political economies pattern and (relatively) fix in diverse ways. People and subjects know themselves, are acting beings, find meaning in and through relatedness; they work to fix and secure social relations in which they will be special and acknowledged, rather than have to remake them in various terrains every day. These may be named as family, which may be another term for any long term, personal, and possibly cohabiting set of everyday relations, as in Nandy's book. The everyday social relations may also be made through friends as distinguished from a family of constraint, or it may be through children and the “unconditional love” shared with them, a narrative I also heard from single mothers in the Netherlands.
- 10 In the increasingly individualized societies in the Euro-American world, the valorization of the self-made individual and the decline in traditional marriage has made children and mothering-parenting into life projects. This encapsulates another contradiction that flashes by every so often, much before any feminist critique—marriage and spouses are uncertain, but children, it is said, are not, even across South Asia where marriage and children are still predominantly taken to be organically, naturally and morally linked. Relatedness and human connection then becomes a driver to motherhood, especially for women whose social life is circumscribed and whose economic dependence is intensified by personal biographies and cultural mores. Even the many, whose life (and labor of care) as voluntary non-mothers or unconventional mothers is sustained by a wider and non-normative network of

meaningful social relations seem to search for unconditional, secure giving and the recognition that goes with it.

- 11 This emotional tenor and desire infuses, explicitly or implicitly, many of the narratives we read in Nandy: those who rationally do not want “their” children to be the only sources of emotional connect; those who decide on motherhood despite social approbation or everyday difficulties; those who are emotionally secure in a range of relations with humans and non-humans. Some of Nandy’s interlocutors, mothers in paid work beyond the home, try to work through the demands of time, social mores and personal desires in what may be a social compulsion, an economic necessity or an emotional choice, but all imbued with a moral surplus or deficit (especially when home-based, individual, personal mothering is reified as against the multiple mothers of extended families or institutional, affordable facilities). For many caring is fulfilling, not least because of the emotional and human contact it can give, the meaning it gives to their lives, and the valuation of (a feminine) self as caring. And as we know, this emotional tenor and the need for human contact can also trap many in abusive and stultifying relations, more than ever if they are compelled to do so or have neither the material nor social-emotional support to make a new life. In this, the “quality” of mothering becomes critical in ways beyond the sense of self and evaluations—for it is the emotional relation and obligations of adult children—sons across much of India—which they must depend on as they become old themselves.
- 12 *Motherhood and Choice* makes a personal journey—in the questions Nandy asks and the literature she delves into, knitted together with the personal narratives and reflections of her interlocutors. Motherhood and the book go beyond an individual journey, however, bringing us back to the gendered structures of institutions, experience and agency in mothering and in possibilities of resistance and creating alternatives. It is a book to be read.

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NOTES

1. Examples include Lahiri (2013), Mehrotra (2003), Narayan (1938).
 2. Much of their large corpus of work speaks to this concern, but two that can be viewed are Strathern (2005) and Carsten (2000).
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Rajni Palriwala is a professor of sociology at the University of Delhi. Her work is in the area of gender relations, covering care and emotion, the welfare state, kinship and marriage, work, women's movements and cross-cultural studies.